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Albemarle High elects first English learner to Student Council



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5 MIN READ

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Albemarle High School ninth-grader Yatzil Romero Rodriguez was expected to assume the class officer position this academic school year. The 15-year-old said she ran for the position in hopes of making a difference.

Credit: Ézé Amos/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Six years ago, Yatzil Romero Rodriguez migrated from Veracruz, Mexico, to Charlottesville and didn't speak English. She said she struggled to fit in at one point because of the language barrier.

As with many immigrant students, she's taking part in Albemarle County Public Schools' English for Speakers of Other Languages program. She's also accomplishing a big milestone. On May 1, she became the first English as a Second or Other Language student elected to the Student Council at Albemarle High School. She will be one of two Latinx on the 20-member council.

"It was challenging, but I got through it," she said.

Romero Rodriguez, a ninth-grader at AHS, will assume the class officer position in the fall. Her tasks will include listening to students' concerns and taking those issues to the Student Council to try to make changes at the school.

She said she ran for the position in hopes of making a difference, explaining that other Latinx students might be able to connect with her because of her background. As she's now fluent in English, she said those with language barriers who speak Spanish can communicate with her.

"I feel like me representing the school as a class officer for sophomore year, they can come to me [and I can] take their ideas to the Student Council and make a change in the school for the future," she said.

Romero Rodriguez plans to run for vice president of the Student Council for her junior year and president for her senior year, stressing that it's important for the panel to be diverse.

"We can build a better school if there's a better communication with minority students," she said.

She feels welcomed now that she speaks English, but that wasn't always the case. She said she knows there are other students who might not feel welcomed because they are not fluent in English.

She said she wants her story to inspire others. It was difficult to adapt to her new life in the United States, saying that making friends with American students was tough. She thought they probably wouldn't like her because she's Latinx, she said.

But Romero Rodriguez has found her way around.

The 15-year-old keeps a busy schedule, taking part in the school's Latinx Club, Advancement via Individual Determination and Key Club, among other activities. She plans to study to become a math teacher or focus on criminology at James Madison University or Christopher Newport University.

"If you keep doing schoolwork or learning how to speak English and write it," then everything will fall into place, she said.

Romero Rodriguez's determination to succeed in school propelled faculty members to encourage her to run for the Student Council.

Russell Carlock, a teacher and a faculty sponsor of the school's Latinx Club, told Romero Rodriguez about the student elections. The application process involved Romero Rodriguez getting signatures from the school body. Carlock said he was impressed by how fast Romero Rodriguez was able to turn the application in.

"This says a lot about her motivation," he said.

Carlock also lauded Romero Rodriguez for being humble.

This year, the Latinx Club produced a short film to combat stereotypes that immigrants face in the school and in the community. As the club discussed who the audience for the film would be, Carlock said Romero Rodriguez listened to students.

"She's someone who will sit and be very on top of listening to what other people are saying but won't necessarily put her voice out there unless someone asks her to give her opinion," he said. "And then she gives this opinion. And it's very deep and thoughtful and people listen to her for that."

On Romero Rodriguez's aspirations for higher office on the Student Council, Carlock said that if those are the goals she has for herself, he has no doubt that she will accomplish them.

"It just blows my mind that she's doing this at the age of 15," he said, adding that he wasn't as mature as Romero Rodriguez to take on leadership roles when he was her age.

In looking at the school, Carlock said it's important to have a wide variety of students who come from different backgrounds who can come together to solve problems as a community.

Nearly 2,000 students enrolled at AHS in fall 2018. White students accounted for 57.3 percent of the student body, according to data released by the Virginia Department of Education. Latinx students made up 13.9%; 14.6% were black; Asians were 8.5%; and those identifying as two or more races accounted for 5.6%.

"In democracy, representation is everything," Carlock said. "This generation of kids is phenomenal. A lot of what we — as educators and adults — can do is create spaces where they have a voice and power to work together to solve things. Once we do that, we'll be really impressed and surprised with how much great things they can accomplish."

Representation is something that also matters to Monticello High School alumnus Richard Aguilar. The 2009 graduate served as class president all four years. He said having minority students in leadership roles can help schools in many aspects.

As the only Latinx on the Student Council, it was important for him to connect with other minority students. He said he was able to communicate with different demographics, making sure they felt included in school events. He asked students about the types of songs they'd like to hear at pep rallies, homecoming or prom.

"Gasolina" by Puerto Rican singer Daddy Yankee was a popular song at the time, so he made sure it was played at school events.

"I was able to fill in that representation ...," he said.

Having students in leadership roles also can help diminish or eliminate stereotypes or prejudice, Aguilar said.

"If more minorities were involved in leadership positions, they can actually bring their experiences [to give] a level of understanding," he said.

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Bryant reflects on Black Student Union, looks toward future



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Zyahna Bryant

Credit: Ézé Amos/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Morris prepares to take reins of the organization at Charlottesville High

Zyahna Bryant said she bumped into some of her black friends in the hallways of Charlottesville High School, but there weren't too many of them in her Advanced Placement courses.

Bryant wanted to see them more — and it was one of the reasons why she was inspired to launch the Black Student Union in her freshman year.

"It's a space to feel safe and be able to talk to one another," Bryant said.

The club quickly morphed into something bigger. The young activist, now 18, propelled the city to begin discussions on race after demanding nearly three years ago that it remove its Confederate statues, and she also appeared on a CNN panel focusing on gun violence. She said BSU members soon realized they could tackle the issues they were discussing.

That included demanding that Charlottesville City Schools diversify its AP and honors courses and hire black teachers, among other initiatives, Bryant said.

Bryant now has graduated and will attend the University of Virginia to study sociology in the fall. Sixteen-year-old rising junior Noelle Morris has been named the next president of the BSU.

"She's very reliable. She's very consistent," Bryant said of Morris. "And I just think she would be a good person to take over. ... She clearly cares about the issues that we talk about."

Additionally, Bryant said Morris is well connected because she serves on Charlottesville's Youth Council. Bryant said she doesn't plan on being involved with the BSU directly but will offer her support, if needed.

"[She] is fully capable of doing what needs to be done," Bryant said.

Setting goals

Bryant and Morris connected through the Youth Council, and plan on staying in touch.

"I look up to her because I love how she's open about everything," Morris said of Bryant. "I love how she's outgoing, speaks her mind and is involved in the community."

As usual, BSU members will determine their agenda during the academic year and prioritize their goals. Morris would like to organize a fundraiser for their upcoming work but still is working on the details.

"I'm excited to see what ideas the members have," she said

Because most of the core BSU members have graduated, Morris said she will recruit new ones through social media or ask teachers to spread the word.

She stressed BSU is like a community.

"I fit in," Morris said, adding she's around people who have the same culture.

Leading with experience

Serving as BSU president and member of the Youth Council will keep Morris busy. But she has a plan: completing homework first, taking breaks and setting aside days to focus on certain projects.

She's used to having a rigorous schedule. In her freshman year, Morris joined the Youth Council, which has a charge from the city to inform community members about issues that affect young people and make recommendations on how to improve the city. It was a decision she made after learning about the group on the school announcements.

"I was like, 'That sounds cool,'" said Morris, who moved to Charlottesville three years ago.

Part of the application required Morris to write an essay. Hers focused on her excitement to make a difference.

"If you are in a group like this, people listen to you," Morris said.

The Youth Council meets once a month and focuses on one or two issues. This year, it conducted a focus group on equity, gathering feedback from more than 500 students. The group presented its findings to Charlottesville School Board members and city councilors on May 2 and 20, respectively.



Noelle Morris

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods/Charlottesville Tomorrow

In 2018, racial inequalities came to the forefront after an article by the New York Times and ProPublica featuring Bryant and Trinity Hughes highlighted disparities in city schools' gifted program, Quest.

The school system overall is 43% white, 37% black and 11% Latino, according to the most recent figures, but 73% of students in Quest are white, 13% are black and 5% are Latino.

Youth Council member Ben Yates, 16, said in an interview that all the recommendations to the city councilors were equally important. However, discussions about diversifying AP courses lingered, he added.

Morris, who has taken honors courses and is enrolled in AP U.S. History, said people have noticed the lack of diversity in the AP courses.

A listener

Daniel Fairley II, who took the reins as Charlottesville's first youth opportunity coordinator in late 2017 to address the achievement gaps for African American students, has worked with Morris through the

Youth Council.

"I see a lot of what Bryant has done in the way that Morris kind of approaches the work," Fairley said. "She's very passionate about helping others and making sure that everyone is heard."

She led the conversation on the Youth Council's equity focus group, asking follow-up questions, Fairley said.

"I hear you say, 'Charlottesville schools are inequitable. What do you mean by that?'" Fairley said Morris would ask students.

The same way that Bryant used her experience from the Youth Council — as far as advocating for other people and gathering voice and presenting to a larger forum — Morris will be able to bring that experience into BSU.

"She's a great listener who's willing to hear everyone out and making sure everyone is heard," Fairley said.

Perseverance

Packages and death threats pummel Bryant's home, including items like "All Lives Matter" T-Shirts and necklaces, Bryant said, adding that her attackers have no limits.

"They do whatever they want because no one is [going] to check them," she said.

But she won't be dissuaded. She said she aims at making a difference in her community because of the generation coming after her, adding if she's going to take the heat, she wants to take it over good causes.

"I wouldn't say I've never been intimidated, but I'm [going] to do what I want. It's my life," Bryant said. "I know the causes that I'm talking about are good causes to talk about, so I'd rather be doing that than some foolishness."

Bryant said sometimes she wonders why she's an activist, but then contemplates some of the changes manifesting in Charlottesville. For instance, the city now has its first black woman mayor, Nikuyah Walker.

"That's a drive," Bryant said. "We're getting things done even in small increments. ... Seeing black people maneuver freely in spaces they weren't before is a driving factor."

Bryant said she's content with what the club has accomplished. The BSU organized a walkout in March to address several issues, the disparities in the Quest program, equity and racial justice. The club also hosted college application work sessions and helped to co-host and planning of Black History Month events, among other initiatives.

Bryant boasted about BSU graduating members. Except for one or two, they will be first-generation students heading to two- or four-year colleges in the fall.

"We've done really well," she said.

Looking toward the future

At one point, Bryant was an aspiring attorney. So, she watched the 2013 trial of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch captain who in 2012 shot unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin to death in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman was acquitted. The trial instead prompted Bryant to become an activist, she said.

"That moment of seeing the non-guilty moment was a turning point for me," she said, explaining that "every black" family can relate to Martin's death.

"Activism can be multifaceted," Bryant said. "You can expect I'll be on UVa's ground doing truth-telling work."

Bryant already has been appointed to UVa's Student Council Ad Hoc Committee on Renaming, Recontextualizing and Removing, which according to the student council resolution creating it, will be "examining the history of various monuments, buildings and historical areas on grounds, conducting interviews with stakeholders and historical experts and creating a final report on what actions are recommended regarding each area of interest."

Bryant, also a 2019 Emily Couric Leadership Scholarship recipient, said UVa's sociology program caught her attention. One of her goals is to conduct public research, including equity in school and urban planning.

As a former student representative to the Charlottesville School Board, she plans to track some of the changes the division aims at making in Quest, she said. But, at least for this fall semester, she said she'd like to be a "normal" college student.

"It's 4.0 [g.p.a.] season. I need to have good grades before I do anything else. UVa is not a joke," Bryant said smiling. "I don't have time to be falling behind."

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Fairley reflects on equity for city's young people



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7 MIN READ

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Daniel Fairley, the city of Charlottesville's first youth opportunity coordinator.

Credit: Zack Wajsgras/The Daily Progress

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Daniel Fairley II wants to create a positive image for young black children.

Since taking the reins as Charlottesville's first youth opportunity coordinator in late 2017 to address the achievement gaps for African American students, he has been piling up several projects to achieve his goals.

And the 27-year-old is doing that through many avenues.

Last year, he supervised students at Albemarle, Charlottesville and Monticello High schools in creating a documentary that featured black men detailing their experiences in the hopes of providing a more positive portrayal of black culture. The documentary has been picked up by the Virginia Film Festival and Shiz International Red Carpet Events.

Fairley is changing the focus of the film this year to feature black children instead.

"You may see me as some kid with dreads and think that I'm some football player — but really I'm an accomplished pianist," he said. "I play for people's weddings. Those are things that I'm super excited about. We get to work with kids this time and be able to say, 'What do you wish adults knew about you?'"

Fairley said he hopes the video will change community members' viewpoints on young black children.

In Charlottesville, black boys and young men endure greater challenges than whites, according to the Community Psychology & Prevention Research Department of Psychology at the University of Virginia. Black youth have poorer academic outcomes, higher levels of poverty, higher levels of involvement with the justice system and greater obstacles to getting medical care than do whites, the report said.

"How can we channel [young people's] energy and channel their excitement into positive things?" Fairley said. "That's what we're looking forward to. It's making sure that their voices are heard."

Shaping young athletes

Fairley is partnering with UVa assistant professor Paul Harris to expand young athletes' identities beyond their ability to play sports through a program called Men Passionately Pursuing their Purpose that is expected to launch in the fall.

"You love sports," he said. "How can I expand your identity beyond that and then connect you to some UVa basketball players and see what it means if you come here and you want to play basketball?"

Men Passionately Pursuing their Purpose will give children an understanding on the benefits of having other skills in addition to athletics, Fairley said.

"You have to learn how to study and learn things really quickly because you only have four hours to do your homework," he said.

Promoting reading

Among other equity issues that affect the lives of black males, literacy is taken into consideration, Fairley said.

Forty-five percent of black males failed the reading portion of the Standards of Learning, according to recent data released by the Virginia Department of Education, and 54% failed the math portion. More than 40% of students statewide earned a standard diploma, while nearly 60% of black students earned a standard diploma; 51% of all children earned an advanced diploma, while 27% of black children earned an advanced one.

Fairley addresses that disparity by promoting reading at grade level by third grade.

This spring, he completed a book club, the Black Boy Club, in collaboration with Justin Reid, director of African American programs at Virginia Humanities, and Rob Gray, pathways coach at City of Promise.

Featuring black authors such as Paul Baptiste, Westhaven students huddled at the Jefferson School to take part in the book club.

"We created an atmosphere where the kids are learning about themselves through characters who look like them," Fairley said. "The children got to meet authors and people the characters are based on. It showed them they can be inside of books and can write books, too. That was a cool experience."

As recommended by the Student Youth Council this year in a dialogue about equity in Charlottesville, Fairley also is advocating for the city school division to create pathways for students to achieve a standard or advanced diploma.

These pathways will direct students on the classes they should take by a certain grade level, he stressed, saying there should also be a track for those wanting to enter the workforce upon graduation.

Employment is important to Fairley, so much so that he has recruited students from the Community Attention and Youth Internship to create a documentary on black men. The program allows students to hone their résumé writing and workplace readiness skills.

Positive role models

Born and raised in Stafford County, Fairley graduated from North Stafford High School in 2009. He earned a bachelor's of arts in psychology from the University of Richmond in 2013.

Three years later, he received a master's in higher education student affairs administration from the University of Vermont. He previously served as area coordinator for housing and residence life at UVa.

He has two siblings, 20-year-old Maya and 13-year-old Jaden.

Growing up, he said, he had positive black male role models who influenced his adult life.

"It's my turn to be that person to say, 'You can do it because you are smart. You're capable. I love you, and you're amazing. You're going to change the world.'" Fairley said. "I need to be that voice because kids just don't hear that. That's how I see my role as."

A dialogue on equity

The youth opportunity coordinator role, advocated by City Councilor Wes Bellamy, is not the only position that addresses equity in the area. Charlottesville City Schools named its first supervisor of equity and inclusion, T. Denise Johnson, in late April. Siri Russell is the director of equity for Albemarle County.

Gretchen Ellis, human services planner for the Department of Human Services, works closely with Fairley, acting as co-staff to the Charlottesville Youth Council. She said the community is beginning to recognize that race continues to be an issue in the wellbeing of people.

"There are a number of people in the community who had blinders on for many years and said, 'Everybody has the same opportunities and chances,'" she said. "I think as a community we are just beginning to recognize that's not the case."

Ellis said Charlottesville applied for a technical system grant to receive assistance to develop strategies to improve black male achievement.

"At the time, we knew our black boys and young men had the worst outcomes than any of the young people in our community in terms of academic achievement, employment, criminal justice involvement. ... We began to work with these national bodies to develop some very specific plans to address those issues," she said.

The people who participated in the work were volunteers, Ellis said, adding that they need manpower to implement some of the strategies that have been proven to make changes in the community.

"As a result of that, the alliance had been interested in having a full-time staff person for a number of years. ... The Youth Council drafted a memo recommending the creation of the position," she said.

Ellis said Fairley has worked the position from scratch.

"In many ways, he has exceeded my expectations because of how well he's been able to connect with both young people and the community," she said. "As with anything, we want to see something happen overnight. It's going to take time to change what's been a cultural situation in this community for hundreds of years."

Charlottesville's interim director of human services, Misty Graves, who supervises Fairley, said the city is making a more transparent effort to focus on equity.

"It kind of calls it out specifically into the mainstream conversation, and I think people are looking to the city of Charlottesville to model that for the entire community," she said.

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